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SUBJECT: Senegal: Increase in tensions Between President Wade and Catholics

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an aside during a 28 December meeting with teachers, President Abdoulaye Wade compared the Monument of the African Renaissance, which some have called idolatrous, with the Cross. In a 29 December response, Cardinal Theodore Adrian Sarr characterized these observations as "an aggression against the Church" and in subsequent comments delivered during his previously-scheduled New Year's greeting event at Dakar's Cathedral on 30 December he said that the Church was "mortified and humiliated" by the President's statement. After his speech young Catholics and police clashed with confirmed reports of teargas being fired into the Cathedral itself and into the Embassy compound which is opposite the church. Later that evening, a delegation of ministers lead by Karim Wade came to apologize on behalf of the President. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) After weeks of debate concerning whether or not his African Renaissance Monument is idolatrous, the President threw more fuel on the fire on 28 December when he said, "For Muslims, a church is place where people pray to Jesus Christ. Everybody knows that in a church Christ is worshipped, but no one ever said that churches should be destroyed or that this is objectionable, they just pass by without thinking about what is going inside. When I pass by a church I am not interested in what's going inside because I am Muslim. This is tolerance." President Wade made this observation after calls by imams that his African Renaissance Monument be pulled down because it is idolatrous. Wade seemed to be suggesting that Catholics were worshiping the physical object of the cross, ergo, if this is not considered idolatrous, why should his monument be thought so? Immediately after this statement, Cardinal Sarr gathered his closest advisors and leading Catholics after which it was announced that he would deal with the subject during his annual homily to mark the end of the year.

The Cardinal Speaks

¶3. (SBU) Without much ado, Cardinal Sarr opened his homily by plunging into the subject at hand saying, "For the past few months the Church has found itself at the heart of a media deluge. (Note. This is in reference to a previous statement in November that President Wade made where he implied that the Catholic community were ingrates. He later apologized. End Note.) What has happened is sad, incomprehensible and perplexing. Once again, our faith and the tenets of our Church have been ridiculed by the highest authority of this country." Cardinal Sarr then listed his grievances point by point, "We are mortified and humiliated by the unsupportable propositions of the President who publicly besmirched the heart of our faith in front of our children and educators. We are mortified and humiliated by the potential risks and divisions that his statements could lead to in the heretofore exemplary relationship that has existed between Catholics and Muslims in this country. We are mortified and humiliated by the President's total disinterest in a community that strives to work for the betterment of all Senegalese no matter of what faith or philosophical leanings. We are mortified and humiliated that the President compared the African Renaissance Monument to the representations of our faith

found in our churches."

¶4. (SBU) The Cardinal went on to call on Catholics to be calm; however, as soon as the service was over, a large part of the of 1,200 people that had gathered inside and outside the Cathedral tried to make their way up Boulevard De La Republique towards the nearby Presidential Palace to protest. Half way up this road police had set up barricades. This is when the scene turned ugly, as police fired teargas into the advancing crowd who were brandishing crosses and pictures of Jesus. As a result, the crowd began throwing rocks and fled back down the Boulevard towards the Cathedral compound which is opposite the Chancery. Eye witnesses, including members of the Embassy Guard Force, reported that the police followed the crowd into Cathedral compound and that errant smoke grenades were fired into the Cathedral itself. While the police pursued crowds around the edifice and into the streets, they also managed to misdirect four teargas canisters towards the Chancery, with two landing inside our courtyard.

Mea Culpa

¶5. (SBU) In order to calm a situation that had now escalated into semi-chaos, President Wade promptly dispatched his son Karim to apologize to the Cardinal. Minister Wade was accompanied by the President's Chief of Staff Habib Sy, Minister of Communication Moustapha Guirassy, and Minister of Social Affairs Faustin Diatta. After the meeting Minister Wade told reporters, "In no way was it the President's intention to offend the Catholic community. The President of the Republic is extremely mindful of his duty to protect the rights of all of our religious communities, including those of the Catholic community. If the statement that the

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President made offended any Senegalese Christians, we present our profound apologies to the both the Senegalese and the international Christian communities."

Offending everyone

¶6. (SBU) Over the past few months the President's response to any criticism of his African Renaissance Monument has been virulent and petulant and he has managed to offend almost everybody in the country. For example, in a separate statement the President commented that every day the revered founder of the Mouride Brotherhood, Cheikh Amadou Bamba, used to walk by many statues in Senegal and that he had never said anything to criticize them. In response, the Chairman of the Young Religious Leaders of Senegal, Sergine Bousso Dieng, a powerful grandson of Amoudou Bamba, said that Wade was ignorant of Islam and the ways of Mouridism. He also warned the President to stop trying to drag Touba, the capital of the Mouride Brotherhood, into political debates.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) The arguments over the monument have become increasingly acrimonious and the President, who is normally very conscious of the fine politico-religious balances within Senegal, has managed to anger almost every community in the country. His own Mouride brotherhood is angry at him for his attempts to drag them into the polemic. Conservative imams are angry at him because of the revealing nature of the monument and their belief that it is idolatrous. The Catholic community is angry at him because he compared the monument to the Cross. Finally, the people in general are angry at him for both the amount of money that has been spent to build the monument and his statement that the statue is his intellectual property, thereby entitling him to 35 percent of future revenues generated when tourists come to see it. The renaissance monument has, indeed, given birth to a new controversy on an almost weekly basis. While distant generations may someday take pride in this new national symbol, for now it is more national millstone than jewel in the crown. End Comment.

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